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ABSTRACT

This discussion of the uniqueness of the middle school focuses on the characteristics of the early adolescent student. It is pointed out that the special needs of these students are infrequently met by the traditional junior high school. Middle schools should be characterized by six unique elements: (1) specific individual counseling; (2) a curriculum providing careful articulation and coordination of learning experiences; (3) blocks of instructional time with interdisciplinary teams of teachers; (4) a variety of teaching methods; (5) a wide range of exploratory courses and athletics that encourage participation by all students; and (6) a focus on learning the skills students will need for future study. Results of a survey of middle school principals indicated that some, but not all, of these elements are currently implemented and that there is a need for special inservice training for middle school faculty. Excerpts from principal-surveys are included. (JD)

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"Retooling" for the Middle School Experience: Inservice Training for Junior High School Personnel

Richard C. Ingram and Steven K. Million

Since the first middle school opened its doors in Bay City, Michigan in 1950, there has been considerable disagreement about the purposes and appropriate organization of middle schools. What is generally conceded, however, is that there exists a true need for transitional schools between the self-contained, child-centered elementary grades and the less personal, more subject-centered environment typical of American high schools. Ideally the resulting "middle" schools would feature organization and curriculum compatible with the unique needs of middle-grades learners whom many consider to exist in a transitional phase of development known as "transescence." Eichhorn (1966) describes "transescence" as "the stage of development which begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence" (pp. 3-4). Those who advocate special schools for transescents maintain that junior high schools have either lost sight of their mission of service to these learners or, alternatively, never really understood that their mission was distinct from that of the typical high school.

Characteristics of "Transescence"

Conrad Toepfer (1983) has identified five major characteristics of transescence which set this learner apart from other children. He points out that . . .

1. The principal element of transescent development is physical change. The timing of these changes within each child is unpredictable and highly variable, yielding both precocious and retarded onsets of pubescence. School personnel must be prepared to help youngsters cope with problems presented by the variable rates of physical development and the psychological trauma which it may generate.

2. The influence of parents, teachers, and other adults grows less important during transescence. Instead the persuasive impact of peers expands. While this is a perfectly natural developmental phenomenon, it requires adult patience and a willingness to conduct interactional dialogues. This kind of interchange acknowledges the

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transescent's search for identity and independence. In fact, to answer transescents' questions with deceit or evasion, or to stand solely on the grounds of adult authority is to risk escalation of conflict and diminution of the critically important transescent-adult dialogue.

3. School personnel (and parents) must be prepared to assist transescents in developing values without seeming to impose them. These transescents must be free to define themselves and to identify the persona they hope to become. The support of adults is essential to the development of "realistic, positive self-concepts and positive self-esteem" (p. 6). The ability to accept and like one's self while defining areas of needed growth and change are critical tasks in transescence.

4. "Transescents need to understand the adult world and to develop effective relationships with adults" (p. 6). If adults fail to work effectively with these transescents, they may never learn the value of working cooperatively. As Toepfer puts it, "The youngster at this time may only learn his fallibility when adults whom he respects admit their own. [Adult] willingness to apologize when necessary is an underrated example needed by transescents" (p. 6).

5. And, finally, Toepfer points out that it is essential for school personnel to understand the implications of the most recent facts concerning brain growth periodization during the transescent years (Epstein and Toepfer, 1978). Studies indicate that 85 - 90 percent of youngsters experience brain growth according to the following pattern:

"There is a period of [expansive] brain growth between ages 10 - 12 years and a virtual hiatus in brain growth between ages 12 - 14 years. During [the] period of [rapid brain] growth, youngsters experience an average [increase] of 38 months in Mental Age followed by an average [expansion] of only 7 months in Mental Age during the . . . plateau period [from 12 - 14 years of age]. As [school personnel] understand the difference in capacity for learning and cognitive growth during the total [transescent period] it is important not to set unrealistic goals for cognitive growth during the . . . plateau period" (pp. 6-7).

The Middle School

In light of transescent uniqueness, it is clear that a schooling regime capable of addressing such specialized needs is required. The "middle" school has been the most often selected option during the past two decades. A recent Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) study by Cawelti (1988) of schools serving transescents indicated that middle schools do the best job of serving this population. That same study, however, pointed out that simply placing grades 6 - 8 or 5 - 8 together does not guarantee that the special needs of these learners will be met. In fact Cawelti concluded that "many schools with grades 6 - 8 continue to be more similar to than different from [traditional] junior high schools" (p. 1). That is, the curriculum and organization of schools serving middle-grades youngsters is often more appropriate to older, more mature students.

Two of the most influential leaders of the middle school movement, William Alexander and Paul George (1981) argue that middle schools should be characterized by six unique elements among which are (1) school guidance systems in which each student counsels with a specific adult who knows the student well and from whom advice on academic, personal, and social matters can be highly personal and consistent; (2) a transitional curriculum (neither identical to that in the elementary school nor the high school) which provides for careful articulation and coordination of learning experiences; (3) daily schedules organized into blocks of instructional time during which interdisciplinary teams of teachers provide appropriate learning experiences; (4) use of a variety of instructional strategies which have been demonstrated to be effective with transescents; (5) a wide range of exploratory courses designed to develop student interests as well as an intramural athletics program which encourages participation by all students; and (6) a core of learning experiences appropriate to transescents focused on the learning skills that students will need for future study.

The ASCD national survey of 672 schools found that those adopting a 6 - 8 grade arrangement were significantly more likely to employ appropriate guidance systems, provide transition and articulation activities, use interdisciplinary teaching, block scheduling, and provide appropriate staff development than were schools adopting other grade configurations (Cawelti, p. 2). Analysis

of the ASCD data led Cawelti to conclude that schools organized to include only grades 6 - 8 are for the most part meeting the needs of their students (p. 12).

The South Carolina Survey

To determine if the ASCD findings applied to middle schools in South Carolina, the authors surveyed the principals of all public schools in the state which use the phrase "middle school" in their name (N = 144). The survey solicited information about the professional preparation of teachers and administrators, demographic data about students, and information about the schools' organization and curricula. Based on a return rate of sixty percent (N = 87), data were analyzed and compared to the relevant recommendations of Alexander and George, Loundsbury, Toepfer, Wiles and Bondi, and other noted authorities.

A summary of the South Carolina data indicated that the typical middle school among those responding was populated by approximately 500 students among whom 62% were of Anglo extraction and 38% were of Afro-American or other origins. The typical school hosted 25 teachers and administrators. Among the teachers, most held elementary certification while their principals typically held secondary certification. In most respects, the middle schools which participated in the study were much like middle schools elsewhere in the nation.

The survey asked principals to anonymously evaluate six pairs of organizational or curricular descriptions and indicate which one of them most nearly described their school. The descriptions they chose, the frequency of their selections, and a comparison of the principals' reports to the authoritative literature are presented below. These findings offer a number of insights into the workings of the state's middle schools.

SET A

In this set principals were asked to indicate which curricular description was most accurately reflective of their school's curriculum.

1. The curriculum of this school is aimed primarily at helping students develop leisure time, career and other special interests.

or

2. The curriculum of this school is aimed at the preparation of students both intellectually and physically for success in high school.

Eighty-four principals (96.55%) of the sample selected description number two. Only three (3.45%) chose description number one.

This finding appears inconsistent with the views of most middle school authorities who prefer a non-traditional academic emphasis in the middle grades. Alexander and George (1981) have written that "While fully recognizing the importance of the organized knowledge content . . . middle school planners need to avoid the stereotyped program of studies [and] instructional organization [characteristic] of many junior high schools" (p. 52). Instead, they prefer a middle school program that includes opportunities for experiences outside the traditional subject-centered curriculum such as community service projects which bring transescents into contact with the natural environment, elderly citizens, and the very young (p. 78).

Emphasizing the academic capabilities of transescents, Epstein and Toepfer (1978) conclude that " . . . middle school programs must: (a) discontinue the mass introduction of novel cognitive skills to middle grade students who [are not ready to learn them]; (b) present new cognitive information at the existing skill level of students; and (c) work to mature [the] existing cognitive skills of middle grade learners" (p. 658).

Finally, Lounsbury (1987) indicates that one basic characteristic of middle schools should be their promotion of "an extensive program of enrichment, exploratory, and special-interest classes and activities" (p. 45). He and the other authorities appear to

reject single-minded reliance on the traditional junior high/high school academic curriculum for middle schools.

SET B

The principals next were asked to select the description which best exemplified the daily organizational pattern used in their school.

1. The school day at this school is divided into "periods" with classes changing every 50 minutes or so.

or

2. The school day at this school is organized into variable units of time controlled by teachers and administrators.

Eighty-six principals (98.85%) selected description number one. Only one principal (1.15%) indicated that description two was most appropriate.

In describing his preferred organizational pattern for middle schools, Lounsbury (1987) calls for use of blocks of time (rather than separate periods) scheduled for academic subjects, under the direction of an interdisciplinary team of teachers (p. 45). Similarly, Wiles and Bondi (1981) write "Most middle schools operate blocks of time during the school day where the . . . academic disciplines . . . can be taught in longer time periods than a single class period. Such blocks consist of a number of modules grouped together. Blocks of time allow for correlation among the participating disciplines and permit teachers to utilize small- or large-group instruction for varying lengths of time depending on the needs of students" (p. 129). Finally, Alexander and George (1981) believe that flexible scheduling facilitates use of a variety of instructional styles. It provides teaching teams with the latitude to create longer blocks of instructional time or to provide students with unstructured time when such is needed (p. 175).

SET C

The third set asks principals to select the description most like the system of grouping students used in their schools.

1. Students in this school progress at their own rates and on their own levels of ability.

or

2. Students in this school are grouped by age and with a few exceptions, are promoted on the basis of their performance in academic classes.

Seventy-two principals (82.76%) indicated that number two was most descriptive of their school. Fifteen of their colleagues (17.24%) selected description number one.

Alexander and George (1981) point out that the grouping procedures used with transescents can vary from adherence to age or grade criteria to a totally nongraded option. They conclude that " . . . the most fully functioning, exemplary, middle schools choose from several strategies for grouping students, strategies which comfortably avoid either of the two extremes" (p. 144). Similarly, Wiles and Bondi (1981) ask whether homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping is more appropriate for the middle school. They write, "The answer is both. Skills groups should be homogeneous, but should not be static, that is, students should be able to move from group to group as they progress along a skills continuum. Students grouped heterogeneously in teams may be grouped and regrouped according to interests, tasks to be accomplished, and skill levels" (p. 138).

The data generated by this study indicate that the vast majority of middle school students in South Carolina are placed in grades based on student age. What intra-grade grouping is done appears to be tied to skill levels.

SET D

The fourth pair of descriptions required principals to select between physical education programs with highly dissimilar purposes.

1. Physical education in this school centers primarily on games and physical activity designed to promote general physical fitness.

or

2. Physical education in this school centers primarily on activities designed to meet the physical needs of individual students.

Seventy-one principals (81.61%) selected description number one. Sixteen principals (18.39%) indicated that description number two was most indicative of their schools.

The relevant middle school literature strongly endorses physical education programs suited to the needs of individual students. Wiles and Bondi (1981) write "Physical growth and development in emerging adolescents require a physical education program that is tailored for each middle school student. Programs . . . should be designed to help students cope with maturational problems like awkwardness, underdeveloped psychomotor skills, and weight problems. All students should be provided the opportunity to participate in a variety of games, sports, and developmental activities designed to meet their own needs, interests, and abilities" (p. 86).

Alexander and George (1981) argue forcefully against interscholastic athletics in middle schools. They believe that ". . . all the students in the middle school need to have experience in sports, experience that is appropriate for their physical status and that can yield feelings of satisfaction to many children who would never make the varsity team. The possible physical damage of inappropriate activities must be avoided" (p. 68).

The data gathered in this study suggest that the orientation of physical education programs in South Carolina's middle schools does not focus on the individual physical needs of students. Instead a more generalized approach to physical fitness is adopted, likely similar to that commonly encountered in high schools.

SET E

Descriptions in "Set E" requested that principals indicate the purpose of social activities in their middle schools.

1. For the most part, this school promotes social activities which promote both opposite-sex and same-sex student interaction.

or

2. For the most part, this school promotes social activities which promote opposite-sex student interaction.

Seventy-five princ[illegible] (86.21%) indicated that their school's social programs were be[illegible]haracterized by statement number one. Eleven principals (12.64%) selected option number two. In addition, one principal (1.15%) did not answer this question.

Alexander and George (1981) have written that "Establishing a new and wholesome relationship with the opposite sex becomes a very significant developmental task. Along with this relationship the middle schooler must also learn to adopt a role as a girl or boy, possibly by accepting a relatively stereotyped one or perhaps resisting this and becoming for a time the 'odd ball' of the class. With changing conceptions of sex roles today, transescents need much help in understanding appropriate behavior for themselves" (p. 8).

Wiles and Bondi (1981) write that transescents often ". . . show extreme devotion to a particular boy or girl friend but may transfer allegiance to a new friend overnight" (p. 27). They assert that middle schools should provide opportunities for social interaction between the sexes, including parties and games, but excluding the predominantly heterosexual orientation of dances. They point out that "Despite a trend toward heterosexual interests, same-sex affiliation tends to dominate during transescence. Large group activities rather than boy-girl events should be scheduled. Intramurals can be scheduled so students can interact with friends of the same or opposite sex" (p. 27).

In light of the authoritative literature, it is encouraging to note that the majority of the schools surveyed promote social activities designed to encourage both same- and opposite-sex interaction. At

the same time it is intriguing that nearly 13% of the principals responding indicated that their school's social program is oriented toward opposite-sex interaction, a phenomenon that may be inconsistent with the needs of many of their students.

SET F

The final set asked principals to select the definition of "success" most indicative of that concept's application in their schools.

1. In this school "success" is essentially a reflection of how well students do in their academic courses or athletic endeavors.

or

2. In this school students are regularly provided with opportunities for "success" in areas other than academics or athletics.

Fifty-three principals (60.92%) selected the second definition. Thirty-three principals (37.93%) indicated that the first definition was most indicative of their schools.

Alexander and George (1981) suggest that "The awards for middle schoolers should increasingly be for the demonstration of learning skill and interest rather than just athletic and other performance skills and interests of limited lifelong use" (pp. 331-332). Extending this reasoning, Wiles and Bondi (1981) warrant that middle schools should not promote a ". . . 'star system' where a few special students dominate everything, in favor of an attempt to provide success experiences for greater numbers of students" (pp. 14-15). They argue for "A wide range of exploratory opportunities, academic and otherwise, [including] Attention to the skills of continued learning . . . Accent on increasing the student's ability to be independent, responsible, and self-disciplined . . . [and] Attention to the personal development of the student: values-clarification, group process skills, health and family life education . . . [and] career education" (pp. 14-15).

Although a majority of respondents indicated that their schools provide students with opportunities for success in non-academic, non-athletic settings, the survey did not require that examples of such opportunities be provided. What may be most notable in these findings is the revelation that nearly 38% of the schools define

success in academic and/or athletic terms. In light of the authoritative literature, this orientation may require reexamination.

Implications for Inservice Training

No teacher should embark upon the enigmatic challenge of middle school teaching without first thoroughly studying the nature of the transescent and the unique qualities of an appropriate middle-grades learning environment. It is not enough for teachers merely to survive in middle schools, they must be capable and willing to employ the specialized knowledge and skills which lead to a positive, productive middle school experience for themselves and their students.

When faculty are selected for middle school appointments, junior high school teachers are often among those first considered. In many instances this is perfectly reasonable since students in junior highs are for the most part identical with their middle school cohorts. Similar rationales are offered for employing upper-grades elementary or lower-grades high school teachers. Nonetheless, the organization, curriculum and philosophy of the middle school contrasts so sharply with those of the typical elementary, junior high or high school that a systematic and thorough teacher-selection process is demanded. To enhance the likelihood of appropriately staffing middle schools, a selection process involving teacher training, administrative and peer evaluation and personal commitment should be adopted.

Whatever their instructional backgrounds, prospective middle school teachers should be instructed in the special needs and abilities of transescent learners. This instruction should make clear how these students are different from their younger and older counterparts in elementary and high schools. It also should place special emphasis on the transescent's changing physical self, increasing dependence on peers, emerging values, expanding need for meaningful interaction with adults, and ancillary slowing of brain growth and learning potential. In addition, prospective teachers should examine the preferred elements of middle school organization and curriculum, including specialized guidance programs, transitional curricula, block scheduling, specialized instructional strategies, interdisciplinary teaching, exploratory courses, and a hybridized core of studies designed to prepare students for future learning.

Participation in such instructional programs is recommended for every teacher and administrator who would work in a middle school, even those who hold middle school certification. This recommendation grows from experience suggesting that middle grades certification is more often an indicator of knowledge about transescent learners than of knowledge or experience in appropriate guidance, scheduling, interdisciplinary teaching and other operational phenomena essential to middle school operation.

Following instruction, teachers should be interviewed by qualified teams of middle-grades administrators and teachers. The focus of such interviews should be determination of the enthusiasm and level of understanding which individual teachers hold for work in a specialized middle school environment. When deficiencies are discovered which cannot be addressed through remedial training, the teams should counsel teachers toward other, more appropriate instructional opportunities.

Finally, it is critically important that the prospective middle-grades teacher who has been trained and invited to join a middle school faculty, make a personal commitment to middle school teaching. In doing so the teacher acknowledges the specialized needs of transescents and the unique pedagogical philosophy which directs the school's organization and curriculum. Moreover, the teacher's commitment signals a willingness to go beyond mere understanding of transescence and middle schools to a dedicated implementation of what the known demands.

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